North America

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The Arab Community in North America

Arabs have been emigrating to North America for over a century, and they now number approximately three million. For most of this period of emigration, the overwhelming majority of Arab immigrants to America were Christian. However, large numbers of Muslim Arabs (and other Muslims) have settled in the New World, especially since World War II. Almost from the beginning, the Arab community in North America suffered from negative attitudes directed against it by the host society. An important ingredient in negative stereotypes of Arabs is the general American impression that Arabs and Muslims are essentially the same people. Indeed, to Americans, the term 'Arab' or 'Muslim' conjures up hostile reactions to a large group of nations or countries (e.g. Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Muslims, etc.) which are seen as indistinguishable. Such views have had a definite impact on the Arab community in North America.

Until World War I, Arabs in North America may be considered sojourners exhibiting many traits of a middleman minority, that is, a community whose members primarily engage in one particular specialized activity such as migrant work or peddling. Indeed, substantial numbers of Arabs in America engaged in commerce, most often beginning as peddlers commissioned by their own countrymen. Their objective was to make the greatest amount of money in the shortest possible time in order to help their families in the country of origin and/or to eventually retire in comfort in their village or neighbourhood. In the meantime, in America, they spent as little of their income as possible, often living in crowded tenements and, while on the road, in barns, or shacks to avoid expensive hotel costs. They did not live rounded lives, allowing themselves no luxuries and finding contentment and solace in family life. They developed few lasting relationships with 'Americans.' *Al-Nizala*, the term the Arab-American community used to refer to itself, is a name which clearly described its status and purpose. It means a 'temporary settlement', and it was used in contrast to 'the Americans' to indicate the alien or stranger status of Arabs in America.

World War I was a watershed for Arabs in North America, cutting them off from their people back home. An important identity crisis occurred when these peripatetic sojourners realized that they had to make a major decision about whether to become 'settlers' or return to their former homelands. It had become increasingly difficult for them to function as temporary aliens. After World War I, it became clear to large numbers of Arabs in North America that it was not possible to go 'home' again and that, in fact, the United States and Canada were their homes. This change from sojourner to permanent settler necessitated, and was accompanied by, other changes, both in the way Arabs in America thought and in the way they behaved. Arabs in America now saw more clearly that they had to become full-fledged Americans. Assimilation was now strongly and widely advocated, and citizenship training and naturalization were greatly encouraged.

In the heyday of the melting pot approach to assimilation, Arabs in America strove to remove any differences separating them from the general American population, except perhaps for food and music. They also neglected (or deliberately chose not) to teach their children Arabic or to instill in them much pride in their heritage. The result was that, by World War II, Arabs in North America were, for all practical purposes, a group indistinguishable from the host society. It took a second wave of immigration and other developments to rekindle interest in their Arab heritage and to revive them as an ethnic community.

Building a new future

Among the most important issues with which Arabs in America have had to wrestle is the definition of who they are, their sense of identity as a people, especially as they encountered and continue to encounter bias and discrimination in their new homeland.

While Arabs in the United States and Canada constitute an ethnic group, they were not an ethnic minority in their former homelands. Their new identity has been shaped by many factors but especially by an active and continuing interaction between conditions in the old and the new homelands – as well as the interplay between their perceptions of themselves and how others see them. Thus, while the early immigrants spoke Arabic and came from a predominantly Arabic culture and heritage, they nevertheless did not think of themselves as 'Arabs'. The main bond of solidarity among them at that time was familial, sectarian, and village- or region-oriented. In fact, the plethora of names by which they were known in the New World reflects both their own lack of 'national' identity as well as ignorance or confusion on the part of the host society.

In a very real sense, the search for an adequate or 'comfortable' identity for Arabs in America has been guided (or perhaps complicated) by the need to feel pride in their heritage and simultaneously avoid prejudice and discrimination in their new homeland. For most, the search is neither successful nor final. They continue to feel and experience marginality in American society and politics.

They try to overcome this in various ways. Some resort to ethnic denial: they de-emphasize their Arab background by claiming connection with what they believe is more acceptable in America. Instead of proclaiming their Arabism, for instance, they claim that they are Lebanese or Egyptian. Some may even deny their heritage altogether, claiming to be Greek or Italian. Some new arrivals, however, choose ethnic isolation. They are unwilling to change themselves, and do not believe they can change the host society.

Among those who want full integration or assimilation into American society, especially middle-class Arab Americans, many emphasize the strong cultural link between Arabs and Americans. For most, accommodation is the easiest and most comfortable stance. These men and women consciously or subconsciously act in ways that reduce their differentness from the American dominant group. They attempt to blend in. Others, especially those who seek material success, and particularly those who are in 'public professions' (television, radio, movies, etc.), often give in and convert to the prevailing view. Not infrequently, these individuals – the very individuals who are looked down upon by the Arab-American community – are then selected to speak for and represent Arabs in America.

The Arab-American community in the 1990s

After more than a century of immigration, it is clear that the basic reasons that Arabs came to America are no different from those that drove or attracted other groups to come. They came for a variety of reasons: the promise of a quick fortune and a sense of adventure; the threat of war or economic disaster; education, training, and technology; or the thrill of living in a free democratic system. Whatever their reasons, true integration and full assimilation have so far generally eluded them. In part, this is the result of the many developments leading to the debunking of the notion of a melting pot and greater tolerance of a multicultural society. The more important reason, however, has been the hostility the host society has shown toward Arab immigrants.

Nevertheless, on the whole, Arabs in America have done very well. Since the 1960s, there has always been at least one representative of Arab background in the US Congress (for example, James Abourezk, Mary Rose Oakar, Mark Joe (Nick) Rahal II). Others have served as state governors (Victor Atiyeh) or on the White House staff (John H. Sununu). Similarly, individuals of Arab descent have been elected to the Canadian parliament (for example, Mac Harb and Mark Assad), as well as to provincial legislatures.

Furthermore, Arab Americans have not only done well, but have even fared better economically than the general population average in many areas. The 1980 and 1990 US census data, for instance, show that Arab Americans reached a higher educational level than the American population as a whole. In fact, according to the 1990 census, 15.2% of Arab Americans have graduate degrees or higher – more than twice the national average of 7.2%. Household income among Arab Americans also tends to be higher than the average. They have also proven to do well in professional, management, and sales professions.

Although many Arabs in America have reached the highest level of their profession, in almost all professions, the American media primarily highlight the negative achievements of Arabs. Quite often, in fact, the media will announce the 'Arab' (or 'Islamic') origin or affiliation of anyone accused of a terrorist act – even before they know whether the perpetrator is indeed Arab or Muslim. In the case of positive role models, however, such as Michael DeBakey or Ralph Nader, the media rarely, if ever, mention that these individuals are of Arab background. In part, the reason is that, because of racism, many find it necessary to hide their origins. Every now and then, lists of prominent Arab Americans are published in the press to inform the public about the community's accomplishments. But the very fact that such lists are compiled indicates that Arab Americans feel the sting of negative stereotyping and try to correct such bad publicity.

Despite the fact that Arabs have lived in America for over a century and despite their major successes, they are still struggling to be accepted in American society. Full integration and assimilation will not be achieved until that happens. ✦

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